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ABSTRACT

Participant observation--a qualitative research procedure characterized by intensive social interaction between researcher and subjects, in the subjects' milieu--is discussed in this paper, along with some of its implications for reading research. After surveying the views of a number of researchers regarding participant observation and the participant observer's role, the paper recounts advantages and drawbacks of the technique, lists some of its possible uses in the monitoring of reading development in learning environments, and provides a bibliography of selected relevant references. It concludes by stating that the work of qualitatively oriented researchers warrants the scrutiny of those interested in reading and its development. (GT)

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# Participant Observation: A Qualitative Orientation for Reading Research

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## Participant Observation: A Qualitative Orientation for Reading Research

Qualitative research, particularly in the field of reading, seems likely to benefit from a resurgence of popularity, if recent expositions in several scholarly journals are any indication. The Reading Research Quarterly, a frequent publisher of reports which invariably contain complex statistical designs, editorialized about "methodological incarceration." Farr and Weintraub (1975), the editors of RRQ, hypothesized that methodological incarceration occurs when research is restricted by traditional concepts of how a study should be designed. Shaver (1979, p. 5) likewise, commented that "the problem of the statistical-experimental Zeitgeist[1] of our time remains." He alluded to the probability that educational researchers have tended to confuse the empirical method with statistical procedures that go under the rubric of experimental design. Moreover, in a State-of-the-Art address at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Cooley (1978) reminded educational researchers.

> ...it is important to remember that most of what is known about people and the universe has not been based on experimentation, but on observation. If we are to further our understanding of educational processes... it is essential that we give more attention to developing methods for conducting explanatory observational studies. (p. 9)

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[1] the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era.

The techniques and methods employed by qualitative researchers represent a different (albeit not exclusive) orientation from that of quantitative researchers who rely heavily on statistical methods and models. The methodology of qualitative research has a long history in the social sciences; it may collectively be called an "ethnographic approach: an extensive description and interpretation effort at explaining the complexity of phenomena..." (Magoon, 1977, p. 652).

In this paper, we will examine one major research paradigm in the qualitative tradition-- Participant Observation is defined by Bogdan and Taylor (1975) as research characterized by a period of intensive social interaction between the researcher and the subjects, in the milieu of the latter. During this period, data are unobtrusively and systematically collected. The purpose of participant observation, therefore, is to develop understandings of complex social settings and relationships. Our examination includes background information on participant observation, some implications for the application of participant observation in reading research, and a bibliography for the reading researcher who may be inclined to pursue in depth the theory and practice of participant observation.

Background

The tradition of "verstehen" or understanding has been instrumental in formulating the position that recognizes the importance of both an inner and an outer perspective of human behavior. Bruyn (1963, pp. 224-235) distinguished between the latter (outer), which assumes that the study of man's behavior or condition is adequate to produce knowledge...,"

and the former (inner), which "assumes that understanding can only be achieved by actively participating in the life of the observed...". Analytical approaches, such as those employed in survey research, establish indicators prior to the act of empirical research, insisting on what ought to occur, not examining what in fact occurs. Zito (1975, p. 91) stated that

> ...only by careful observation of real social situations can we obtain the kind of data required to build theory that makes any sense. Many conflicting theories have been established wholly upon presumptions of human behavior rather than upon meticulous observation.

Filstead, (1970, p. 8) who viewed quantification as a "very useful" approach to reality, urged that researchers" ...realize the interrelationships and interdependence of both quantitative and qualitative methods..." in order to avoid remaining "incapable of truly understanding the complexities of human behavior."

Lofland discussed qualitative methodological field work as an attempt to holistically assess the life situation of others. "The fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being is face to face interaction (1971, p. 2)." Thus, the qualitative study of people <u>in situ</u> is one of discovery.

Participant observation, a research technique or strategy involving the direct sharing of experiences and prolonged contact, has as its goal the discovery of the world as the <u>subjects</u> conceive it (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). Phenomenology serves as the rationale for those techniques which involve actual entry into others' fields of perception. In a description of Dilthey's humanistic research methodology, Bender (1976, p. 37) referred

to a process of interpretation involving rules. "For example, the researcher must limit his interpretations to the observed expressions, to what actually happened, and avoid venturing into intuited psychological motives."

According to Wiseman and Aron (1970), the participant observer must exist mentally on the two levels, inside and outside the group, and be sufficiently involved to understand meanings. Upon entering a group, a newcomer is assigned a role. Bruyn (1963, pp. 14-20) sought to clarify this role by outlining three axioms and corollaries:

Axiom I The participant observer shares in the life activities... in face-to-face relationships. As a consequence, he is changed as well as changing to some degree the situation...

Corollary/The role of participant observer requires both detachment and personal involvement.

Axiom II The participant observer is a normal part of the culture and the life of the people under observation.

Corollary/The scientific role the participant observer is interdependent with his social role in the culture of the observed.

Axiom III The role of the participant observer reflects the social process of living in society.

Corollary/The researcher participates in a social process which has meaning for people in groups outside the group he studies.

It is this process of role-taking that makes the method of participant observation possible. Junker, (1960, pp. 35-38) delineated in a typology the kinds of roles the participant observer researcher may assume:

1) Complete participant member of the in-group, sharing secret information;

2) Participant as observer, field worker's observer activities are not wholly concealed;

3) Observer as participant publicly made known as outset;

4) Complete observer.

Whatever the role, it is the researcher's aim to understand individuals from their own frame of reference. Therefore, the data collected in studies employing participant observation are different. Rather than initially explained in impersonal categories or definitive concepts, data are expressed in more personal terms in the form of a portrait or illustrative story. The mode of conception for this type of data takes on a sensitizing concept; those kinds of terms are sought which give a sense of reference, a general orientation to the phenomenon under study. For example, more would be made clear by concrete examples. Operationalized definitions, on the other hand, would deny the authenticity of the original meanings and functions these concepts have. The modes of description, such as analysis and synthesis, also attempt to seek out central themes and symbols. Bruyn (1963) suggested that in data analysis, events, beliefs, patterns are separated in order to see new relationships among them. They are put together in a new way with the invention of new categories or by relating them to a theoretical viewpoint. In data synthesis, the parts are put together and the emerging concepts integrated into a meaningful relation.

Participant observation has many advantages and drawbacks. Douglas saw it as a "compromise method..." yielding "only a compromise truth (1970, p. 197)." Espousing ethnomethodological principles, Douglas would

opt for total involvement, that is "going-native." Others, like Edgerton, (1974) claimed that the chief limitation of participant observation lies in the extent to which it depends upon kinds of events witnessed in the field and the personality of the person reporting. Smith and Geoffrey (1968) would add to these disadvantages: it (the technique) demands almost constant interaction; the nature of involvement precludes detachment; there is the possibility of improper manipulation.

Based upon their study of an urban classroom, Smith and Geoffrey also recounted these advantages: of knowing most of what is going on; of interacting, conversing to get more information; being a member of a social system one is privy to more information. Becker and Greer (1958) reported that the technique is most useful when the researcher attempts to understand a particular group or social problem rather than test hypotheses about relations between variables.

Validity problems of participant observation studies have been lessened but reliability remains a problem. The data are valid "to the degree that a researcher records fully and accurately that portion of the cultural life of a group which he seeks to study (Bruyn, 1963, p. 180)." Bruyn's verification criteria represent checks on consensus, and include time, place, language, intimacy of encounter and social circumstances. The more the observer confirms the expressive meanings of the community, the closer is consensus. One way to increase validity is to show the written analyses to subjects themselves and get their reactions.

Reliability concerns the replication of the study and the likelihood that two or more people would perceive the same meanings, using the same

categories and procedures. Problems of replicating personal-involvement studies include: (1) natural site and observer are complicated; meaningful relations develop which are hard to record; (2) natural observations involve a minimum of control; (3) situations and groups change a great deal (Douglas, 1970). By collecting the same information in several different ways, the researcher is able to increase reliability to some degree.

## Implications for Reading Research

Shuy's (1977) warning against quantitatively assessing language development also has implications for the study of reading:

> ...This is the appropriate place for a plea for caution in the use of quantitative data in language when the analysis moves outside the range of the study of an individual's speech. Quantification is much safer when limited to diagnostic concerns. What is more, a huge world of exciting research exists at such a micro-level. It seems to be time to stop thinking of large N's and to start analyzing the language abilities of a few people with greater intensiveness and depth (p. 82).

What, then, are some implications for the use of participant observation in monitoring reading development in learning environments? The following have been extrapolated in part from Erickson's (1977) suggestions about operationalizing "ethnographic monitoring:"

* coding amounts of time children spend attending to the teacher (aspects of listening, eye contact, postural orientation) during reading instruction;

* deciphering the topical relevance of children's discourse with the teacher and with other children, (children's talk and teachers' strategies) during reading instruction;

* noting differences and similarities between cognitive and affective behaviors in individual children;

* defining patterns of social interaction in the reading class at various times;

* supplying more reliable anecdotal ammunition for future reporting and/or referral;

* interpreting parts of reading behavior data in order to make recommendations which have relevance to classroom, as well as clinical, dynamics.

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In addition to the references following this article, these selections should provide a theoretical and practical grounding for those interested in the qualitative paradigm.

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## Conclusion

Reading researchers who use participant observation do not initially establish hard and fast indicators, thereby insisting on what ought to occur. They try to avoid the pitfall of theory construction based on presumptions of children's behaviors, rather than on careful observation. When conducted from a qualitative direction, reading research employing participant observation goes about the business of observing phenomena. Its aim is to know what is going on with children while they develop as readers. The work of qualitatively oriented researchers, then, warrants the scrutiny of those interested in reading and its development.

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